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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS¹

BY CARLETON E. DAVIS²

Concerning certain features of our Association and its work I have developed pronounced and perhaps radical views during the past year. One of these features which has been uppermost in the past two weeks concerns the customary Presidential address at the Annual Convention. I find no mandate in the Constitution requiring that the troubles of that official shall culminate in a so-called address to his fellow-members when, as matter of fact, he may feel that he should ask advice rather than give it, and plead for indulgence for his own shortcomings rather than attempt to make suggestions for the guidance of others.

My first radical view, therefore, is that the presidential address be omitted as a formal part of future Conventions. I congratulate the Program Committee on having omitted at the business sessions of the present Convention official addresses of welcome, responses, and other formalities. Likewise I congratulate the Publication Committee on having shortened the period of the Convention to a minimum and taken steps to see that the entire time of the Convention proper is utilized in fruitful business endeavor.

I feel that the widest future opportunity for this Association lies in a change in the relationship between the Sections and the central organization. The Sections must be developed—those already in existence must be strengthened, new sections must be created—all with a view of a final amalgamation in one central organization of the entire water works interests of the country. This process, carried to a logical end, will not destroy our existing organization but perhaps change its character, opening up to it a much wider field of usefulness along somewhat different lines.

Judicial opinion, as expressed in recent decisions, leans to the conclusion that a beneficent trust is not illegal. We have the

¹ Presented at the Montreal Convention, June 22, 1920.

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opportunity to create a beneficent trust—one that will work to the advantage of the water works operators and result in benefits to all the communities served by our utilities. To meet the situations that are before us to-day and that will arise in the years to come, to prevent lost motion and eliminate unnecessary duplication, all the water works of the country should function for their common interests through a central body which will be representative of all localities and which should be organized to meet all conditions and needs.

The American Water Works Association when it adopted its name expressed the intention to serve as this central body. The question before us to-day is whether we propose to grasp the opportunity to act or whether we shall let the opportunity pass us by. Acceptance of the present as we find it and committing the future to our successors is the easiest course. I believe our Association will elect to follow the more difficult but more fruitful path.

The majority of our members are restrained in their activities by regulations imposed upon them by public service bodies or by the restrictions of legislative enactments or by the limitations of city laws and ordinances. Many of these restraints are irksome and are not accepted calmly or without chafing under the restraint. Along the field of organization work we have a relatively free hand to organize and develop. We have an opportunity to demonstrate that the water works engineer and operator is a capable organizer and when given the opportunity can conduct his own affairs with efficiency and at the same time with due regard for the interests and welfare of the public, with an eye to the future and an alertness for the present. Necessary protests against undue outside restraint will come with much greater force if supported by the weight of a compact, comprehensive, well-organized and conducted Association.

It is stated on good authority that the investment in water works represents the largest total in the entire field of comparable utilities. Water works officials know that their plants, of all utilities, supply one universally, indispensable commodity—vital for human existence and basic for all community life. We have common interests, and that we are grasping for methods of expressing this interest by working together for a common end is shown by the number of water works organizations. The next step forward is the affiliation of the several organizations to handle matters of mutual interest with the power and weight that come from large numbers, unity of purpose and harmony of ideas.

Organization is the dominant note heard throughout engineering and allied fields at the present time. The American Water Works Association through accredited representatives recently attended a National Council in Washington of organizations concerned with public utilities like our own, seeking to coöperate offensively and defensively in matters vitally affecting the interests, personal and official, of their members. Whatever may be the final outcome of such efforts, or whatever may be the path the council of affiliated societies may elect to follow, self-respect demands that the water works of the country shall be able to speak as a unit at such councils and with the weight attaching to full and not partial numbers.

There is need for joint action and coöperation and it is for our Association to decide whether it will be the leader among all water works interests, and whether it will so conduct itself and its affairs that other water works organizations will feel the call to join it without undue proselytizing or the need of exerting pressure. I speak of proselytizing as applying to associations and not individuals, for no one can question the importance of increasing the membership in our own body during the period of change which I hope we are about to see.

Considered dispassionately, in cold blood, what does the American Water Works Association as now conducted, offer to its members?

First, is the JOURNAL which in my opinion is serving more and more to develop the Association, bind its members together, and attract increasing membership.

Second, is the privilege of attending once a year a Convention which of necessity is geographically inaccessible to a large portion of its membership.

Third, is the opportunity of voting by letter ballot for officers.

The Association is likewise the medium for the production of various standard specifications and standards of practice and custom, a matter which I would like to refer to later.

All of these openings and results are admirable, but the scope is limited, and most of us must conclude that the Association as now conducted, is not the active help to water works men that it should be and that it can be. Membership in it does comparatively little to promote the standing of the individual member in the community, protect him in a personal way, or place the utility which he conducts on the high level in the public mind to which it is entitled. The recognized official machinery of the Association is too remote

from the individual member and functions in too cumbersome a manner to respond to his needs or to be in his mind a tangible asset for his personal help.

The Association naturally thinks of itself as a parent Organization and the development of the Sections may appear as the breaking up of the family tree and weakening of the main stem. I feel that the contrary will be the case, provided the central organization is willing to look upon itself not as a major factor but as a clearing house—a medium of communication; or to draw an ambitious analogy—the Congress at Washington in its relation to the several States. Service rendered must be the underlying principle of the organization which attempts to weld into one functional unity, the entire water works interest of the continent.

We are holding this Convention in Canada—the home of a large number of our active, corporate and associate members. I feel confident that the further development of the principle underlying the Sections will tend to stimulate Canadian interest in the same measure that I believe it will tend to awaken interest in other portions of the continent, irrespective of geographical location. Water Works problems are physical and material, social and political. The first two mentioned are common, irrespective of locality. The last two mentioned depend upon the human element, and human nature has common characteristics the world over. Water works men on this continent have underlying interests and will continue to coöperate in the future as they have in the past.

We do not realize our strength because we have never attempted to exert it as a unit. Organized society is helpless against attacks and demands of relatively small but effective, because organized, groups working together. The existing lack of cohesion among water works men places them relatively in the position of the present unorganized public, powerful but helpless because of its inability to work together. Sometimes among our own ranks we hear references to the so-called little fellow and the big fellow. Each one of our members has something to give and something to receive. The perpetuation of the false idea of big and little, great and small, is harmful because it is based on wrong premises, is unreal, and exists only in the imagination.

The public water supplies of the country are developing from year to year meeting the growth of the country. They present highly complex technical and engineering problems. The period of

outside regulation has been with us for some time past and is increasing. Local, state and national health organizations are charged with functions relating to water supplies which are sometimes arbitrary and absolute. Public service commissions are given or assume increasing authority from year to year. Water works operators must determine for themselves whether they propose to accept, without a voice in the matter, standards which may be imposed upon them from the outside, or whether they propose to set up certain standards for themselves which outside bodies must of necessity accept because of the authority behind the conclusions of the water works operator. If the latter is to be the case, the water works men must take the initiative; otherwise it will be taken from them. If the water works men do not lead, they must follow.

Standards of practice and procedure must be done through Committees and Committee work will become of increasing importance. The path of the Committee must be smoothed as much as possible. When the authority for Committee work can emanate from a central body, representative of all the water works of the country, when coöperation comes logically and as a matter of course and not under option of possible rival organizations as at present, the desired end will be in sight.